

Nadler Statement in Honor of Gay, Lesbian, Straight Alliances and the National Day of Silence

Tuesday, 12 April 2005

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Hundreds of thousands of students across America today celebrated the National Day of Silence, a day-long demonstration of support for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender peers silenced by discrimination and harassment. Congressman Jerrold Nadler (D-NY) offered remarks in the House of Representatives praising the participants.

Nadler is a cosponsor of H.Con.Res. 123, a resolution supporting the ideals of the National Day of Silence. He has also authored legislation to increase funding for anti-bullying campaigns in schools.

Congressman Nadler's statement to the House was read at a student-organized "Breaking the Silence" press conference on the steps of City Hall in New York. Those remarks follow:

"I rise today to join hundreds of thousands of young people across the nation to 'break the silence' surrounding the scourge of anti-gay bullying and harassment in our schools. In more than 4,000 schools in all 50 states and Puerto Rico, students have taken a day-long vow of silence to peacefully and poignantly draw attention to the abuse routinely faced by their lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) classmates. Over 450,000 students are expected to participate in this year's National Day of Silence.

This ever-growing, student-led effort, co-sponsored by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) and the United States Student Association, is a clarion call to parents, teachers, and school administrators to help end the all too common practice of dismissing or discounting student-on-student harassment. It is increasingly clear that young people of conscience will not sit idly by as their LGBT friends or classmates are preyed upon by bullies and bigots. They will stand up and speak out against such bigotry and intolerance, even if the adults in their lives will not.

We have all heard the saying, 'sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me,' which has been used for generations by countless children to fend off verbal attacks from their peers. Unfortunately, the notion that such verbal bullying or harassment is a 'normal' and unavoidable part of growing up remains a widely accepted attitude amongst school administrators and teachers in this country. Too often, adults tend to dismiss or even romanticize schoolyard bullying as some sort of coming of age ritual or an inevitable 'rite of passage.' Today, I join with the growing chorus of voices, including informed educators, children's rights advocates and students, who reject such anachronistic, survival-of-the-fittest thinking.

The uncomfortable truth is that 'names' and labels can indeed hurt. For sensitive or vulnerable young people — particularly LGBT youth who are already struggling with their sexuality in a cultural and social context that often is overwhelmingly hostile to it — such verbal abuse, and the social and emotional isolation that often accompanies it, can leave lasting emotional scars.

And too many schools have a culture that fosters and sustains a hostile environment for these youth. Surveys indicate that the average high school student hears 25 anti-gay slurs daily; 97 percent of high school students regularly hear homophobic remarks. Even more alarming are the results of GLSEN's most recent National School Climate Survey, which found that 84% of LGBT students had suffered some form of abuse and 82.9% of these reported that adults never or rarely intervened when present. It is not surprising that such a pervasive atmosphere of harassment takes its toll. LGBT students are far more likely to skip classes, drop out of school and, most disturbingly, attempt suicide.

According to numerous studies, LGBT teens are 2 to 3 times more likely to attempt suicide. Such statistics are a sobering reminder that we must redouble our efforts to provide our children with safe and secure learning environments. No student should be harassed or attacked simply because they are perceived as different, or because they have had the courage to openly acknowledge their sexual orientation.

Through their actions, the student organizers and participants of the Day of Silence set an example for their peers and their elders alike. Their silence has spoken volumes about the need for us to recognize the corrosive climate of fear and intimidation that any kind of bullying creates. Our schools should be havens for learning and personal growth, not arenas for conflict and harassment. For their courage, their compassion, and their tenacity, I honor all those who took this vow of silence today.”

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